

VZCZCXRO3170
OO RUEHCI
DE RUEHIL #2572/01 3570554
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 230554Z DEC 06
FM AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5670
INFO RUEHTA/AMEMBASSY ALMATY PRIORITY 9739
RUEHAH/AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT PRIORITY 1589
RUEHEK/AMEMBASSY BISHKEK PRIORITY 3917
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO PRIORITY 1057
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 1821
RUEHDBU/AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE PRIORITY
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL PRIORITY 6594
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 7507
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 4805
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 9911
RUEHNT/AMEMBASSY TASHKENT PRIORITY 2308
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA PRIORITY 0870
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 3216
RUEHKP/AMCONSUL KARACHI PRIORITY 3862
RUEHLH/AMCONSUL LAHORE PRIORITY 0878
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 3590
RUEHPW/AMCONSUL PESHAWAR PRIORITY 9139
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ISLAMABAD 022572

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/22/2016

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KWMN](#) [PK](#)

SUBJECT: POSTURING OVER WOMEN'S RIGHTS LEGISLATION REFLECTS
SHIFTS IN POLITICAL ALIGNMENT

REF: A. ISLAMABAD 22290

[1](#)B. ISLAMABAD 18917

ISLAMABAD 00022572 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker, Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) With no fanfare and in the privacy of his office, President Musharraf signed the Women's Protection Bill (WPB) into law on December 1. The bill's contentious journey through Parliament cast into sharp relief the cleavages within and between Pakistan's major political parties. The Pakistan People's Party (PPP) supported the bill, while its Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy (ARD) partner, the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) (PML-N), elected to abstain rather than vote with the ruling Pakistan Muslim League (PML). The two most powerful members of the Islamist Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) coalition devolved into a damaging public row over whether their members should resign from the national and provincial assemblies to protest bill's passage. The bill also exposed once-buried divisions within the ruling Pakistan Muslim League: while the President declared that there would be no compromise on the WPB, prominent members of the ruling PML were negotiating with the six-party religious Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) coalition on amendments that would have preserved discriminatory Hudood Ordinance provisions, infuriating secular coalition partner Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM).

[1](#)2. (C) The PML's next step -- a bill covering a broader scope of traditional cultural abuses against women -- may prove more palatable, giving Pakistan's political parties something on which they can agree. The new bill may also, at least for now, de-politicize the protection of women's rights and give opportunities for moderate political parties to consolidate partnerships ahead of 2007 elections. End

Summary.

WPB Passage Leaves Party Cleavages Exposed

¶3. (C) On December 1, President Musharraf signed the Women's Protection Bill (WPB) into law. According to Pakistan Muslim League (PML) Secretary General Mushahid Hussain Syed, the President opted for a private signing (rather than a highly publicized signing ceremony at the Jinnah Convention Center, as had been planned) to keep the religious MMA coalition from gaining the upper hand in what had become a strong but disingenuous charge: that the government had adopted an "un-Islamic" law.

¶4. (C) The WPB's passage cast into sharp relief the cleavages within and between Pakistan's major political parties. Now that the bill has become law, politicians are consolidating their gains or stemming their losses.

Musharraf and PPP: The Beginning of a Beautiful Friendship?

¶5. (C) The PPP, Pakistan's most popular opposition party, voted for the WPB, angering the other two main opposition parties (MMA and PML-N). That decision, Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) Vice President (Islamabad) Syed Bilal said, irrevocably damaged the PPP's bonafides as a party ideologically opposed to Pakistan's military dictatorship. By breaking ranks with the opposition and voting for the bill, Bilal said, the PPP showed that they are only interested in obtaining power. (Comment: An irony-filled observation, as the populist PPP vote for the WPB is utterly consistent with its progressive ideology: the party has long sought to repeal the onerous

ISLAMABAD 00022572 002.2 OF 003

provisions of Zia's Hudood Ordinances but lacked the political clout during Benazir Bhutto's rule. End comment.) The PPP's close cooperation with the government to shepherd the bill through the National Assembly also left the PML-N doubting the commitment of its ARD partner. PML-N officials have told poloff that the party is now hedging its bets by reenergizing discussions between JI and micro-party Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaaf (PTI) on forming a possible electoral alliance.

¶6. (C) Press reports and drawing room chatter following the WPB vote initially speculated that Musharraf may have been courting the PPP as a more reliable liberal ally to check conservative tendencies in the PML. Although the PPP's support for the WPB did not seal an electoral deal, it certainly signaled Benazir Bhutto's willingness to cooperate with the government when doing so serves her party's interests. The local press now carries daily reports on alleged high-level discussions between the President representatives and the PPP leadership on a possible pre- or post-election alliance.

¶7. (C) In contrast, attempts by senior PML officials (including party President Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain) to undermine or amend the WPB during its three months on the National Assembly floor (Ref. A and B), coupled with a refusal by other PML officials to vote for the bill, fueled speculation of a disconnect between Musharraf and key leaders in the governing party. Following this public display of PML disunity, subsequent public statements by high-level PML officials (including Shujaat and Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz) intended to dismiss rumors of a pre-electoral political alliance with the PPP have produced the opposite result: the more frequently PML stalwarts deny extending feelers to the PPP, the more pundits are convinced that a deal is afoot.

MMA/JI: This is Not About Women, It Is About Musharraf

¶8. (C) Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) leader Qazi Hussain tempered his initial rhetoric on immediate mass resignations by MMA members as it became embarrassingly clear that the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam Fazlur Rehman (JUI-F) would not follow suit. Many JI leaders are infuriated by this "betrayal" by MMA partner JUI-F. JI Foreign Relations Chair Abdul Ghaffar Aziz acknowledged that the JUI-F's unilateral decision not to resign called the foundations of the MMA alliance into question -- hence JI's recent rush to negotiate with PML-N and PTI. Privately, JI Vice President (Islamabad) Syed Bilal told poloff that the MMA will not resign; JI calls for public demonstrations are just a way to rally mass support. "The whole point of rousing public furor against the government is to force Musharraf out of power," he said. The masses, he said, do not really understand or care why the WPB is "un-Islamic." (Comment: The MMA's tactic of frequent calls for mass demonstrations over the past 18 months has generated, at best, a marginal response. End comment.)

MMA/JUI-F: Double-Crossed and Taken for Granted

¶9. (C) Mufti Abrar Ahmed, private secretary to JUI-F leader Maulana Fazl-ur-Rehman, told poloff that the JUI-F tried to be a consensus builder once the bill was introduced into the National Assembly. The MMA, Ahmed said, was ready to sign the ulema-PML "consensus draft" of the WPB (ref B); but the PML double-crossed the Islamic party coalition on the day of the vote when Information and Broadcasting Minister Muhammad Ali Durrani had lied about which version of the bill would be voted on. As a result, Ahmed said, the MMA had no choice but to walk out, and the political betrayal is the reason why the

ISLAMABAD 00022572 003.2 OF 003

MMA's negative reaction to the bill has been so strong. Deobandi members of Shujaat's Ulema committee have expressed similar sentiments of betrayal.

¶10. (C) The PML routinely takes advantage of the JUI-F's willingness to act as a facilitator, Ahmed said, and takes credit for actions that are not theirs. Even now, according to Ahmed, Shujaat has appropriated as his own recommendations made by the MMA and the ulema (group of religious scholars) during negotiations on the WPB. Ahmed later provided post with a copy of the text of the ulema's recommendations, which matches almost exactly the text of a private bill Shujaat submitted to the Assembly days after Musharraf signed the WPB. The sole exception is the replacement of "watta satta" (exchange of brides between two clans -- a practice both Hussain and his cousin have practiced) with "vani" (forced betrothal).

The Way Forward: More Relief for Women,
Potential Alliance of Moderates

¶11. (C) As soon as the WPB became law, President Musharraf and key PML allies declared that it was only the first step to enhance the position of women in Pakistan (ref A). Shujaat's private bill -- the Prevention of Anti-Women Practices (Criminal) Amendment -- outlaws a number of traditional practices and provides for fines and imprisonments up to three years. These offenses include preventing women from receiving their fair share of inheritance; forced marriage; marriage to the Koran; forced vani (betrothal); and the use of the triple divorce. This bill -- a lean slice of legislation comprising barely two pages of text when introduced in early December -- may acquire some heft before the Assembly returns to session in 2007, as Shujaat intended to consult with the MMA on the text during the parliamentary recess.

¶12. (C) Comment: The passage of the Women's Protection Act marks the first step forward after three decades of repression under Zia's Hudood laws (ref A), but the blood on the floor at the end of the legislative battle shows just how difficult it is to get anything done in the current political environment. While the Women's Protection Act deals solely with illegal sexual relations, the new bill covers a much wider range of injustices done to women. If passed and enforced, this follow-on legislation could have wide-ranging benefits for ordinary women. That the tenets of the bill already carry the stamp of approval from both civil society and religious scholars is a positive sign, although sponsorship by Chaudhry Shujaat Hussein (no champion of women's rights) may yet reveal another political agenda. President Musharraf cannot disregard the JUI-F's accurate observation that the government needs MMA support to deal with the security problems along the Pak-Afghan border. He also must carefully manage Shujaat and other disloyal PML members, as he still needs the party machinery they control. PML-PPP cooperation on the WPB illustrates, however, that Musharraf may have found a way to insulate the government from the dictates of religious conservatives and increase his independence from the atavistic Chaudhrys. End Comment.
CROCKER